

The Front Line

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Summary: The Battle of Wolf 359 rages, and a young Commander Ben Sisko finds himself in the captain's chair

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Commander Benjamin Sisko rocketed out of his chair. His fists clenched and his stance battle-ready, he stared down the apparition on the viewscreen.

Locutus stared back. The Borg's body was swaddled in polished black cybernetics. His handsome features were massacred by the laser eyepiece that wrapped the right side of his face. "Resistance is futile. You will be---"

Sisko muttered, "I heard you the first time," and turned on the aft Tactical station. "Red Alert. All hands to battle stations. Shields up." Feeling rather useless standing over the Helm, he returned to the center seat. Never the less, he kept his arms braced and leaned forward, ready to vault to his feet should the need arise. A whooping klaxon drowned out the background bleeps and murmurs. Sisko's voice rose above it. "Back us off, Helm. Full impulse."

"Full impulse, aye."

"Prepare a data probe for immediate launch."

"Probe loaded."

"Begin recording. Emergency log USS Saratoga, Stardate 43997.5," he articulated carefully, but hurried urgency seeped into his tone.

"Have encountered Borg cube on the edge of the Kyle Sector. Seems to be on course for Sector 001. Request advisement and further orders. Helm, download our coordinates to the probe."

The ship's intercom chirped. "Benjamin," came a gravelly voice, "We are at Red Alert. What's going on up there?"

"Captain, we've come across the Borg cube that destroyed our colony this morning."

"Benjamin, don't--- don't---" the captain broke down into a reserved coughing fit. Sisko winced. He'd seen enough Virillian toxic fever in his time to know that the coughing wouldn't let up soon. The attack of illness upon his usually stoic Vulcan captain had been rather immediate. Turalk hadn't even had time to officially give Sisko command. Sisko did his best to turn his thoughts from his incapacitated captain and back to the situation at hand.

"Sir," Lieutenant Zar, the Bolian at Tactical, stated, "the Borg cube is hailing us again. Same message."

"Ignore it, Lieutenant." Sisko steepled his fingers, and considered carefully. "Lieutenant... fire a warning shot across their bow. Phasers, ten percent power."

"Aye, sir. Firing..."

A thin beam of crimson energy lanced out from the Saratoga's phaser bank, and sizzled barely a meter to port of the monstrous cube of a ship inhabited by the Borg.

Sisko found the viewscreen of little use insofar as providing him with the information he craved, so he barked, "Report."

"The Borg ship is continuing to advance, sir."

Sisko breathed a silent curse, made his decision, and hesitated as long as he dared before he ordered, "Mister Zar, open fire."

The Saratoga, looking small and insignificant against the massive cube, began dispatching phaser beams and torpedoes at random. The phasers plowed the hull of the cube, sending up sparks and clouds of plasma that were quickly extinguished by the void.

"I don't get it." The ensign, an Hispanic named Rodruigez, at Helm shot Sisko a quizzical look. "Don't they have shields or anything?"

Sisko looked nervous, though he tried not to. He absently rubbed the stubble collecting on his chin, and mentally commented that he really should shave. "You're right. This is too easy."

He sighed. Looked like a standoff.

Then again, maybe not. "Commander, I believe they're preparing to return fire. There are increased energy buildups---"

The ship shuddered. Not the usual brief, violent jerk that followed a phaser or disrupter hit, but a continuous harsh vibrating that tore at the Structural Integrity Field. From this, Sisko knew even before Zar blurted, "Tractor beam!"

"Reverse course, full impulse!"

"We are at full impulse, sir!" Rodruigez shot back. Of course they were. He'd ordered it--- how long ago? He'd forgotten the old captain's trick. Feel for the thrum in the deck plates to ascertain speed.

So impulse had no effect. He'd have to resort to dangerous measures. Then again, in space everything is dangerous.

"Helm, any course, Maximum Warp."

Rodruigez gaped back at him, fingers hovering just short of the 'engage' touchplate. Zar leaned far over the Tactical console, not wanting his peers to overhear him challenging his commanding officer. "Sir, if warp doesn't break us free, the resulting feedback---"

"I know that, Lieutenant," Sisko snapped. The tension was evident in his voice, and he didn't like it. "If anyone has any other options, let's hear them."

The Bridge fell silent for a moment. But only for a moment.

"Course laid in, sir."

"Reinforcing SIF."

"Awaiting orders, sir."

"Engage, Ensign."

The Miranda-class ship's two large but dated nacelles surged and flashed with power. For a flicker of a second, following the sudden acceleration, Sisko felt an invisible wall slam the air from his chest. Then the inertial dampeners realigned, and he gasped a greedy breath.

They were clear of the tractor beam, and coasting away at well past light speed.

Without being asked, Zar supplied him with a tactical report. "Cube is holding station, sir. They're scanning us. They seem to be trying to determine if we're any sort of threat before they move on."

"I still don't get it," Rodruigez said. "Why don't they have shields?"

Zar took it upon himself to answer the question. "Well, we underestimated them. Maybe they underestimated us."

"Quite an oversight," Sisko interjected. "No... I think they were just experimenting."

"Experimenting!" someone exclaimed.

"Well, let's review what we know," he offered. "Computer, search Starfleet Logs. Subject: Borg."

"Searching..." the feminine, all-business voice returned. "Two corresponding entries found."

"Specify."

"Science officer's log, USS Gorkon. Stardate 39989.7. Captain's log, USS Enterprise. Stardate 42761.4."

"Play first entry."

A deep, monotone voice, evidently Vulcan, began to speak over the Bridge speakers. "Science officer's log, Stardate 39989.7. The Gorkon has located and retrieved the deserting Doctor Aaron Borg Ju, after extensive investigating of the doctor's xenobiology records, which proved quite---"

"Fascinating, I'm sure," Sisko muttered. "Computer freeze play. Play second entry."

"Captain's log, Stardate 42761.4." Sisko sat bolt upright. Something about that voice. Something hauntingly familiar... The log continued, "The omnipotent entity known as Q had returned us to Federation territory. While in the Delta Quadrant, we initiated an unprecedented first contact with a race known as the Borg, which turned into a rather harrowing experience. The Borg are an extremely dangerous and destructive race of half-organic half-cyborg beings, who's sole purpose seems to be the, as they put it, assimilation of other races into their Collective, by force if necessary. They adamantly believe that by merging man and machine, they better themselves considerably. Technological advancements include ships of massive proportions, shields that can adapt to our weapons, and---"

"Freeze play!" Sisko barked.

"So that's it, then," Zar stated. "Once we've fed them enough weaponry, they begin to adapt their... Commander?"

Sisko stared ahead. He'd placed the voice. "Computer, captaincy of the Enterprise?"

"Riker, Commander William Thomas, serial---"

"Former commander?" They wouldn't give the flagship to a junior command officer, would they?

"Picard, Captain Jean-Luc, serial number SP-937-215."

"Date of change of command."

"Stardate 43989.1."

Hours in the difference. Yes... the timing was right. But if it was true...

"Computer display file photo of Captain Picard on Main Viewer." The face of Jean-Luc Picard appeared on the viewscreen as ordered. The crew looked on, bewildered.

"Now, present image of Locutus of Borg."

There were gasps about the Bridge.

Locutus and Jean-Luc Picard were one and the same.

"How---?" someone managed to stammer.

Sisko mentally shrugged. Aloud, he said, "Doesn't matter. I'd be more worried about the defense implications."

"What d'you mean?" Zar asked. Then understanding dawned on his face. "Picard has command level access."

"The Enterprise is the flagship," Sisko took up. "She's always on the front line. Picard can access our tactics, ship deployment, shield modulations..." He trailed off to heighten the dramatics, thereby making his point.

"We don't stand a chance."

"You're wrong, Lieutenant," Sisko said with a bravado he didn't feel. Still, he was on his soapbox now, and for the life of him couldn't get off. "That's all we have. We call it Saratoga."

His speech was cut short by a buzzer on the Tactical console. "Commander, the cube is moving off. Warp Three... Warp Six... Warp Nine..."

"Intercept course, Maximum Warp."

The Saratoga wheeled hard to port, then blurred as it jumped to warp speed. Sisko took in the nervous glances the Bridge crew threw his way, and tried his best to create a facade of calmness and coolness. Despite the fact that he didn't have a clue what to do next.

Leaving a characteristic rainbow trail in it's wake, the starship cruised past the cube, and about-faced to stare it down yet again.

The viewscreen became the overwhelming element on the Bridge, as the enemy vessel pictured there swelled continuously.

"They're not slowing... They're still on course."

Sisko gritted his teeth and quietly ordered, "All stop. Hold position."

"My God," Rodruigez murmured to no one in particular, "We're playing chicken... with that."

The two vessels closed the gap. It wasn't until the last moment that Sisko realized the Borg weren't worried about such a small starship making such a small dent, and ordered, "Evasive!"

The deck pitched as Rodruigez threw the ship up on it's starboard strut, and the Saratoga's undercarriage shielding scraped across the Borg hull. Rodruigez's nimble fingers played the Helm console with minute delicacy, banking hard over and away from the cube.

"The Borg have resumed course for Earth." As if it needed to be said.

Sisko had a call to make. He wanted to hammer the Borg with everything they had. Maybe soften them up a little for the rest of

the Fleet. But he knew, as did the rest of the crew, with their eyes rooted to the viewscreen, that the Saratoga was well out of it's depth. They needed help, and lots of it.

And he needed advice. "Sisko to Sickbay."

"Sickbay here, Commander."

"Let me speak to Captain Turalk, Doctor."

"Commander... Captain Turalk's condition has worsened. It would be inadvisable to involve him at the moment."

Sisko cursed. Turalk was a good friend, and they were as close as Vulcan reserve would allow. But there were more pressing matters to attend to. The situation had changed in a matter of moments. The ship was in his hands officially now. And his indecisiveness was dogging him.

Zar cleared his throat. "Captain Sisko." Sisko appreciated the sentiment. Under other circumstances, he might have enjoyed a chuckle. "Orders coming in from Starfleet."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant."

Zar cleared his throat again, and scanned the text on his monitor. "Saratoga: Emergency log acknowledged. Stop. Assembling contingency fleet at Outpost Wolf 359. Stop. Request immediate presence. End transmission."

Sisko thanked Starfleet for giving him a lifeline through his haze of indecision. "Helm, set course for Wolf 359. Warp Eight."

Once the Saratoga had broken onto the scene, the battle had just begun.

To starboard, the Borg cube advanced slowly but surely.

To port, a vast fleet of starships, thirty-eight in actuality, Sisko knew, launched preliminary volleys across the void between them.

"This is Admiral Dunn of the USS Endeavor," a gruff voice said through the Bridge speakers, "All ships, scramble, fire at will."

"This is USS Yamato, taking fire---"

"Valiant has been destroyed, Admiral."

"Yamato, pull out!"

"USS Melbourne here, going in."

"Damn! Tractor beam!"

"Yamato---"

"Yamato is gone, sir."

"Melbourne, heavy casualties!"

"Gorkon here! Under fire, under fire---"

"Direct hit! No effect!"

"Shields down! Shields---"

"USS Gorkon, requesting immediate---"

"Saratoga, this is Endeavor, requesting assistance!"

Sisko shook his head to clear any other thoughts, as he realized the last comm message had been directed to him.

"Oh, um, roger that, Endeavor." Roger that? Nobody says 'roger that' anymore, his brain screamed, but he pressed on. "Assistance on the way." He closed the channel. "Helm, ahead full impulse."

The captain staggered onto the Bridge, the chief medical officer on his heels.

"Sir!" Sisko almost saluted.

"Relax, Commander. I---" he choked off a cough.

Sisko gestured toward the center seat. The captain waved him off.

"Take her the rest of the way, Ben. She's in capable hands."

Sisko nodded.

The Saratoga twisted and turned through the gauntlet of phaser fire, along the almost non-existent curvature of the Borg ship, and zeroed in on the Endeavor, an Excelsior-class, another dated ship on it's way out of the service like the Saratoga herself.

Sisko swallowed visibly, more visibly than he'd intended. The Saratoga had been sent out as a scout, an interceptor, but because of his compassion he'd placed the ship--- his ship--- on the front line.

Rodruigez swept the Saratoga across Endeavor's bow in one fluid pass, allowing just enough time for both ships to drop shields. The Saratoga's pinpoint transporter beams plucked survivors from the larger ship, just before the Endeavor ruptured under the stranglehold of a Borg tractor beam, and explosively decompressed.

"One hundred fifteen survivors aboard, sir," someone on the quarter-deck informed him. "We lost the admiral, Captain."

Sisko took the statistics in stride. "More power to the shields. Full about, torpedo bays one through three, lock 'n' load."

"Torpedoes on order."

"Fire. Wide spread."

A barrage of torpedoes cleared the starship, and joined the ranks of

other torpedoes as they smashed harmlessly into Borg shields.

"Damn it!" Zar groaned. "We're losing ships hand over fist!"

In the next moment, the Saratoga herself was ensnared.

The tractor beam was stronger than the last one. It held the ship taught despite the exertion of the engines. The deck plates vibrated visibly, forcing people back to their seats. The whine of the engines rose above the Red Alert klaxon, and Sisko submitted. He had to, or risk a warp core rupture. "Ensign, all stop."

Three or four smaller pinpoint tractor beams flared into being, and began rifling the Saratoga's hull, tearing away hull plates.

Sisko balled his fists watching the viewscreen shift it's view to the gashes along the starboard flank, and the debris floating there, among... corpses. Corpses of his people. Endeavor's people. People. Ravaged by space. He felt... violated. He felt mad.

Zar seemed to sense this, and asked, "Captain, permission to return fire?"

"It wouldn't do any good. Damage report."

"Shields down. Hull breaches on Decks 17 and 18, sections---"

"Sir--- the Melbourne!"

The Melbourne, it's hull badly scored and it's running lights off, evidencing power failures, arced steadily toward them. "Melbourne to Saratoga," the comm message cast a ray of hope to the exasperated crew about Sisko. "Captain, the Melbourne's given all she's got. We've evacuated. Hold on while we put her to good use."

The Melbourne interjected between the Saratoga and the Borg tractor beam emitter, eclipsing the beam.

Free, and left to it's own devices, the Miranda-class picked it's way to safety, bidding the Melbourne a silent farewell.

"Now, Lieutenant," Sisko twisted back to Zar. He wanted back into the fray as soon as possible, but there were still regulation procedures to follow. "Full damage report."

All eyes turned to the Bolian. He tried to avoid eye contact, hating to have to be the doomsayer. "Captain, that last beam ruptured the matter/ antimatter coolant tanks. We have a warp core breach in progress. I estimate the ship will be destroyed in... twelve minutes."

Sisko rubbed the bridge of his nose, suddenly exhausted. He looked briefly at the captain, seated at an inoperative science station, then said, "This is Sisko to all hands, he announced. "Evacuate the ship. I repeat, all hands, evacuate. This is not a drill." As the Bridge crew dutifully filed out, he returned his attention to Zar. "Further damage?"

"Oh. Hull breaches on Decks 17 and 18, sections eight through

twenty-one. Emergency forcefields are in place. And... Sir? There's some buckling belowdecks... Deck 3, section... sections B and C, sir."

Sisko's eyes went wide with panic. He shouldered past Zar and bolted into the turbolift.

Deck 3 was a smoldering wreck. Debris, collapsed bulkheads, were strewn across the deck, swaddled in flames. People of all walks of life hurried past him, but he continued on blindly, fear gripping him.

He darted around the bend in the corridor, and stopped in the middle of a shuddering breath. There she was.

Jennifer Sisko lay beneath a fallen titanium rafter, lifeless.

"No..." Sisko murmured. "No no no no no no..." He began clawing at the rafter. Fire seared his hands, and jagged edges shredded his uniform sleeves, but he still dug at the wreckage to no avail. All the time he was staring into her face, her gaze deadened, without a flicker of being behind her eyes.

Sisko's mind clouded over. He was dimly aware of someone seizing him, pulling him back. Slowly, as acceptance crept into him, he became aware of being shoved into a compact lifepod, his son Jake, and Zar, crowded next to him, and then the rush of acceleration as the pod was jettisoned and sailed away, leaving the hulking wreck of the Saratoga behind.

They'd been drifting in the black void of space for a little over two hours. Sisko, Jake, and Zar sat in stony silence. Finally, Sisko found it within himself to break it.

"Zar... listen... You saved my life. I... Thank you."

The Bolian would've blushed if his skin tone had allowed it.
"Commander... Ben... Really, don't---"

"Look!" Jake broke in, jabbing a finger toward the viewport. Sisko had been trying to avoid looking out at the wreckage and the dying embers of death-ridden starships floating about Wolf 359, but he followed Jake's gaze.

And saw the USS Enterprise cruise past, in evident pursuit of the Borg ship.

Sisko smiled as best he could, and said, "Give 'em Hell, Commander."

END

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file.